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Paint Application: Theories and Techniques

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PAINT APPLICATION:

THEORIES AND TECHNIQUES

(TITLE)

BY

NANCY KING MERTZ

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

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PAINT APPLICATION:

THEORIES AND TECHNIQUES

BY

NANCY KING MERTZ

B. F. A., University of Illinois, 1974

ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Art at the Graduate School
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PAINT APPLICATION THEORIES AND TECHNIQUES

Is art an inborn source of power or do daily experiences create artistic drives? I am strongly convinced there are biological forces creating these urges in all of us. Many of us, however, are denied the free expression of artistic impulse because of our compulsion toward the social concept of normality; the creative impulses are ignored until, finally, the ability and urge completely diminish.

However, states Joyce Cary, "Those of us who obtain solitude in thought, create freedom of mind; each of us is compelled to form our own ideas of things." If we wish to convey these ideas or feelings, we express ourselves through artistic means.

The factor which makes an artist unique is his ability to materialize the instinctive life of the deepest level mind. He has the capacity to unite the individual egos into one, creating a life in which the world of fantasy has not become an unreal world. A major conflict he must face is that of reason and imagination, the two which he must unite. He does this not through the production of practical objects nor through philosophical ideas, but through his creation of an artificial and self-consistent world composed of practical need combined with the fantasy world. Thus, he achieves the "true nature of art" in an ideal sense.

The twelve paintings described in my thesis are of two very different themes: one of human life and the other of plant life, the uniting force being the free manner in which paint is applied. Each

of the works is concisely discussed with favorable and unfavorable points presented, and a description of the manner in which they were executed.

Chapter two deals strictly with oil painting and offers suggestions for a painting medium formula, painting support and ground. Methods for brushwork and techniques such as imprimatura, scumbling and alla prima are also presented through personal experience. The third chapter presents those techniques concerning watercolor which I, personally, have found to be successful. Watercolor must be handled very delicately, which the reader will discover through viewing my first, rather awkward watercolor to the fresh, sparkling final one. Suggestions are made in this chapter for techniques to employ and those to avoid.

All of my ideas and techniques were developed through much experimentation and encouragement from both family and friends. The main force behind my work has always been to paint as I wish to paint while achieving social acceptance at the same time. Most certainly my central Illinois upbringing has reinforced my realistic approach toward subject matter, and encouraged me to cling somewhat to social convention, an influence which has proven to be a most satisfactory one.

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CHAPTER I

WHY MUST AN ARTIST CREATE?

The creative faculty exists in all of us to some degree. But it is suppressed at an early age in most of us and emerges later, if at all, with difficulty.

--John Madison Fletcher

An interesting controversy often arises concerning artistic urges, as to whether they are always inborn sources of power or whether they may be acquired. Psychoanalysts suggest that artistic urges or drives may be acquired through experience; that new habits create new motivations and skills. Along with others, I believe that the truly dynamic quality of urges results from the underlying biological forces.[1-1] But these forces are born in all of us; we are all artists to some degree. Whether the artistic trait is developed is decided by our personalities and environment. We can be physically harmed so that our bodies can no longer express themselves in natural movement and sounds, or we may be psychically deformed because we are compelled to accept a social concept of normality which excludes the free expression of artistic impulse.[1-2] Both of these handicaps quickly eliminate a strong desire to create in most of us. But those of us who obtain solitude in thought, create freedom of mind. We are not alone in our feelings, only in mind; each of us is compelled to form our own ideas of the things. If we wish to convey these ideas and feelings, we express ourselves through artistic means.[1-3]

In Feelings and Emotions: The Wittenberg Symposium, psychologist Langfeld states:

> It can be said that emotions are at the root of aesthetic creation, but not as some mysterious driving force that guides the artist in his endeavors, or supplies the energy for his effort. Nor can it be said that a man is emotional because he is an artist, but rather he is an artist because he is emotional, or more explicitly, because his life is full of conflicts, which he is best able to overcome in artistic expression.[1-4]

A major conflict he must face is that of reason and imagination, the two which he must unite. He does this not through the production of practical objects nor through philosophical ideas, but through his creation of an artificial and self-consistent world composed of practical need combined with the fantasy world. Thus, he achieves the "true nature of art" in an ideal sense.

To externalize fantasies is the main driving force of creativity; a form of self-therapy for the release of repressed instincts. The artist disguises the personal form of these fantasies by submitting different symbols or subject matter. At the same time, he is creating a material and objective piece of art which is pleasure-producing for the viewer, but openly reveals none of his unconscious thoughts. Freud has stated:

> Art affords an outlet for the satisfaction of instinctive urges which are denied their normal outlet by social convention.[1-5]

Often an artist's fantasy life retains a child-like awareness: delight in the discovery of something new. To allow this child-like quality to remain on the surface and to let it govern adult behavior would indeed grate upon social convention. Therefore, the artist must relay his fantasies and discoveries through art. This joy of discovery is his starting point or inspiration. He is now eager to explore and reveal his discovery, to see it materialize. He has to somewhat translate his inspiration, whether it concerns real or imaginary objects, into formal and ideal arrangements of

colors and shapes which will still convey the unique quality, the magic of these objects in their own existence. The child-artist is also faced with the same task, as Pearl Greenberg illustrates in her book, Childrens' Experiences in Art:

> Communication is far more intricate and complicated than simply expressing an idea in terms of the verbal symbols we call words, and being understood and answered in like manner. It reaches into much more subtle realms where often there are no words at all to parallel what has been said. And yet communication is taking place. What greater joy is there when, as a child, you find that you can look at something and then note it down on paper in the form of a picture? Suddenly you are able to communicate in another and sometimes richer language than of words. What is more, people understand--and respond![1-6]

Communication as a means of striving for social convention and acceptance, can create strong creative urges. Children (and adults to a certain extent) try very hard to be accepted by their peers, and will do practically anything to win approval from parents and teachers. If a child's artwork is praised by an adult, or easily passes inspection by his peers (the deadliest of critics), he will eagerly return to work; the praise foremost in his thoughts, creating his urges.

Occasionally, the child who is able to communicate well through the use of visual images is, in fact, a "gifted child". It has been found that the majority of children prior to adolescence have the ability to project a positive after-image on a screen after their eyes have been exposed to pictures of various sorts. They are capable of doing this in such a fashion that they are able to see in the image details which were not noted in the picture itself. This gift, labelled "eidetic", often declines on the approach of adolescence, but remains with a rare few who usually become artists.[1-7] This advantage or "gift" would certainly be an enoouraging factor toward creativity!

The fact that the majority of children prior to adolescence possess this skill is evidence to support the theory that creativity is inborn rather than acquired. I realize that many feel an individual can merely obtain some degree of technical skill in art through training, and this may be the case. I am, by no means, qualified to refute this "acquired ability" theory, but through my experiences as student and instructor, I strongly believe that we are born with creativity in all forms. There are those who realize their potential and take advantage of it, and there are those who ignore their creative impulses until, finally, their urge and ability completely diminish. It is those who approach art with an obsessive drive, a constant urge to create, and an underlying force in activity and thought, who are truly "gifted".

A glance at paleolithic history provides evidence that art, no matter how communal or practical, was the exercise of an individual talent. It was not the casual product of an idle hunting tribe or magical cult, although the paintings were probably associated with these activities, but the "pre-requisite condition of (painting) production was the existence of rare individuals of exceptional sensibility and expressive skills."[1-8] This acute perception set the artist off from the rest of the community: he was a non-conformist then as he is now:

> The artist, the individual endowed with exceptional sensibilities and exceptional faculties of apprehension, stands in psychological opposition to the crowd--to the people, that is to say, in all their aspects of normality and mass action.[1-9]

Although the artist of paleolithic time possessed some of the same basic qualities as the contemporary artist, primitive art can not be compared to the developed art of civilized man, for whom the life of intelligence has become a necessity. Artists throughout time have created through an

activity of the senses, elemental as the primary emotions of love, hate and fear. But again, this creativity is confined to special individuals who, through special faculties of sensation or special skill in emotion, can appeal to the mute emotions of their fellow man.[1-10] This requirement of appeal by the community will often serve as impetus for creativity. The artist can, and will create a work of art for himself, but he only reaches the full satisfaction which comes from the creation of a work if he can persuade the community to accept his creation. For this to occur, his work must either be practical or pleasant to view. Thus, the community often determines the style or subject matter of an artist's work, however, the true artist will retain his individual drive which determines his creative activity.

The primary function of the artist, the only function which gives him his unique faculties, is his capacity to materialize the instinctive life of the deepest level mind. Freud suggests:

> ...that the aesthetic pleasure produced in us by the creative artist has a preliminary character, and that the real enjoyment of a work of art is due to the ease it gives to certain psychic tensions.[1-11]

Freud attributes the artistic instincts and drives to the breaking down of barriers between individual egos, uniting them all in some collective ego, creating a life in which the world of fantasy has not become an unreal world.[1-12]

These three egos, usually termed "levels of consciousness", are the ego, super-ego and the id. The id is the obscure inaccessible part of our personality discovered through dreams. It is filled with energy derived from instincts, but it has no organization and no unified will, only an impulse to obtain satisfaction for the instinctual needs, in agreement with the

pleasure-principle. The laws of logic, particularly the law of contradiction, are not present in the id.[1-13]

On behalf of the id, the ego introduces between desire and action the procrastinating factor of thought, during which it makes use of the residues of experience stored up in the memory. In this way it ousts the pleasure-principle, which exerts undisputed sway over the processes of the id, and substitutes for it the reality principle, which promises greater security and greater success.[1-14]

A more common term for super-ego would be "conscience": "the complete function of self-observation and conscious self-discipline and self-direction, but this function becomes so habitual as to be largely unconscious in its operation."[1-15] In the early years, it is developed through parental authority, then the super-ego takes over in the adult years to guide the ego in much the same way as parental influence.

Concerning the problem of creativity, obviously the work of an artist corresponds with each region of the mind:

> It derives its energy, its irrationality and its mysterious power from the id, which is to be regarded as the source of what we usually call inspiration. It is given formal synthesis and unity by the ego; and finally it may be assimilated to those ideologies or spiritual aspirations which are the peculiar creation of the super-ego.[1-16]

If the creative imagination is guided by the egos, then the impulse to create is induced by conditions of society, environment, and the desire to channel emotions into a concrete visual statement. For many artists, the verbal form of communication is inhibitive: the introvert, because of his doubtful or self-conscious manner, is unable to state his thoughts verbally, while the extrovert, in his desire to appear content in his surroundings, will not verbally "impose" his deepest feelings upon others. Because of this, the artist must rely upon the

visual element as a more expressive form for his intuitions. If, then, a sympathetic relationship is established between an artist and the outer world, the artist is impelled to represent his impressions in all their essential vitality.

Every creative mind, regardless of personality, undergoes the same four phases of the creative process. These phases are the force which drive an artist to produce; they are the urges which defy criticism and defeat. And further, it is because of these drives that an artist will overcome discouragement or handicaps to follow through with his intentions:

> ...(1) urge to create, which may be only a hazy and intangible state in the way of a vague restlessness, or impulse to action as a child may manifest in the manipulation of wooden blocks. (2) "illuminating flashes of insight" follow directly the urge to create. They are also fragmentary, incomplete, but built up bit by bit. The intellect constantly plays the selective and interpretive role in dealing with these tossed-up materials. (3) the artist's ability to carry out his dream is measured by his control of the essentials of technique. To the disciplinarian, technique and tools are paramount, if not quite sufficient. To others, the mastery of tools and technique is secondary to "self-expression," if not of minor importance. (4) the will to keep up, to maintain "the tenacious grip on the clearing vision of the completed product". The essence of the task is the will to see the job through. The lack of this will marks the great body of us off from the truly creative artist.[1-17]

CHAPTER II

OIL PAINTING TECHNIQUES AND MATERIALS

> I have to paint pictures--Oh yes I have to--some cuss inside me forces me to paint--those things they call pictures...When man uses material to the glorification of self he's--damned--When man loves material and will not under any circumstances--to the best of his abilities--destroy its own inherent beauty then and then only can that wonderful thing we call art be created.
>
> --John Marin

The materials and techniques introduced in the following pages may be familiar to the artist and may prove to be a good starting point for the beginner. Only a few are mentioned here: they are the techniques and materials I have used in my work. To describe all of the tools and materials used in painting would involve a review of materials throughout history, and to experiment with all of them during the short time as a graduate student would certainly be too great a task. The methods I have employed have proven most satisfactory concerning my personal and physical approach toward painting, and in most instances, the style derived from these forces has a direct relationship with the subject matter. When considering subject matter, I chose two very different themes: one of human life, and the other of plant life. Although the motifs are vastly different, they are unified by the manner in which they are painted: the brush strokes are often loose and free, openly exhibiting a physical involvement with the paint.

All of the works done in oil are painted upon canvas attached to wooden stretchers. This surface is strongly preferred over masonite or

canvas board for my purposes, because of the flexibility of the surface. The rigid surface of the other supports definitely lacked the "give" of canvas, which I found to be inhibiting. The brush seems to merely slide in a consistent manner across the surface of these panels, as opposed to the various ways paint is deposited upon canvas in a single brush stroke.

When using unprimed canvas (11 ounces minimum weight per square yard), the canvas is first pulled taut across stretchers then sized to seal the fibers and to keep the oil in the paint from eventually rotting the canvas. Although there are many methods and commercially prepared solutions available, the easiest method I have found to size the canvas is to brush a mixture of equal parts of "Elmer's Glue" and water onto the taut surface, let it dry, then lightly sand the surface in preparation for the ground.

The function of the ground is to fill the open areas in the weave of the canvas and to provide an absorbent and reflective surface upon which to paint. For economy of time and money, I prefer to simply apply off-white latex paint which dries in one hour or so. It is much more economical than the commonly used acrylic gesso or white lead oil paint, and the off-white tint can give a warmer tone to the canvas when underpainting, which I prefer over the stark white of other grounds.

If it is necessary to utilize old canvases for the sake of economy, it is best to remove the entire old surface and ground. This can be done by soaking the canvas in the bathtub overnight then scraping the paint off the next day. The salvaged canvas must then be treated as new: it must be restretched, sized, and a new ground applied before introducing paint to the surface. If this procedure does not work, the canvas must be discarded. Through disappointing experience, I found that painting over an old picture

is never a good idea: if the brush strokes of the first painting are even slightly thicker than a thin flatness, the directional lines of the old composition will always be at variance with the new.[2-1]

Because some areas of my paintings approach the feeling of impasto, my efforts at painting over old works proved quite unsuccessful. I enjoyed the effect achieved when an entirely different color was applied over an old color. The brush stroke was such that the original color occasionally appeared alongside the new color, or, if little painting medium was used, it appeared in small dots within the new color area in much the same manner as a "dry brush" stroke upon the surface. In most cases, the original color had little or no relationship to that particular area of the new subject matter, which I found to be enriching. Those peculiar lines or dots of unrelated color often enhanced and freshened the total color scheme and the dots of color seemed to make the canvas sparkle. But this technique had to be abandoned because of the obvious contour of the brush strokes beneath the new image.

From a distance, Something to Keep Us Going appears to be quite a powerful painting. Much of the effect is lost, though, when the viewer takes a closer look and finds that the spinal movements and contours of the model's back have nothing to do with the definite ridge running vertically over her body, the result of painting over an old composition. Although the model's pose is somewhat unusual and the statement imposing, the distraction provided by the ridge is quite unfortunate: the poor model appears to have a badly misplaced spinal column!

To remedy this situation of conflicting brushstrokes, I began underpainting large areas with a thin wash of pure bright colors. For areas which were to be predominately cool colors upon completion, I underpainted

Fig. 1 Something to Keep Us Going
30 x 22 12/75
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John B. King
Arcola, Illinois

with warm shades such as cadmium vermillion red light and cadmium barium yellow light. And for final warm tone areas, I used the cool colors of viridian, permanent green light, ultramarine and cobalt blue. This method is quite similar to an old technique termed "imprimatura," which involved the staining of a painting ground with a thin film of transparent color. Usually tiny areas of the imprimatura remained uncovered to permit these unusual spots of color to enrich the surface. The pigment most commonly used was pure burnt sienna for bright colors, and a combination of burnt sienna with ultramarine or viridian for grey or green tones. One great advantage of this technique is that it eliminates the stark white ground so that colors can be seen more readily.

Another method commonly used to eliminate the original white color of a ground is called "toning." It involves the application of a uniformly solid color of white mixed with umber and blue for portraits, or if a darker final tone is desired, vermillion mixed with green. Although I do not choose to use this method for underpainting, it is a good system toward facilitating the progress of a painting. To establish proper color relationships on a stark white ground is not an easy task.

This personal form of imprimatura is employed only in the compositions dealing with human life. My compositions concerning plant life are handled in a much different manner which I will discuss later. In Dunes, Mr. T. E. Weed and Friends and Untitled for Two Reasons, this underpainting is quite obvious in many areas. In Dunes the cadmium red acts as a lively border separating the severe white of the figure's leg from the neutral background; and surrounding the warm areas of her jacket are touches of cool dark blue, making a strong division here also. Again, the position of the figure is an unusual one in this composition, dividing the canvas

into definite positive and negative areas. My intention in this painting was to make the negative areas of the background just as important as the positive shape of the figure, the negative areas helping to place even more emphasis upon her unique pose.

Another composition which may strike the viewer as being a bit out of the ordinary is Untitled for Two Reasons. The figure is placed left of center appearing to lead off the canvas, but stopped by a leg propped against the chest and glance back over the shoulder. This glance seems to continue even beyond the right shoulder of the viewer, increasing the sort of sensitive mystery evoked by the figure's expression. I chose to label the model in this composition as "the figure" rather than to give it a specific gender. It was my intention to have the viewer decide whether the figure is male or female, increasing the element of spectator involvement, and encouraging the viewer to rely upon personal experiences and thought. As the artist, my thoughts on the gender of the model still vary, which I find encouraging: the painting is thus less "taken for granted" as most are through continual viewing.

The underpainting is apparent in this composition by the hint of cadmium red and yellow appearing along the edges of such cool areas as the eye, the back of the head and neck, and alongside the cool green of the shirt. These small marks of color seem to keep the edges from becoming too rigid and unyielding, helping the background to unite with the figure as an important element rather than some random color choice merely filling in the negative area around the figure. The cool blue-grey of the cheek and jaw line gradually works its way into the warmer tone of the background, enhancing the feeling of uncertainty or pensiveness displayed by the figure. Obviously, if this subtle movement of the blue-grey had been

Fig. 2 Dunes
22 x 28 11/75

replaced by a strong, definite line, the entire feeling of the painting would have been destroyed. Often, too, a strong dark line will tend to make an edge advance rather than recede because of the reflective qualities of that particular line. Dark transparent areas rely on refraction of light; thick paint can confuse tonal values by providing reflections and accidental highlights. The figure in Cezanne's composition, Le Vieille au Chapelet, possesses a dark line under the jaw so thick that it is ridged with highlights.[2-2]

The nervous movement of the paint in the background of Untitled..., affords some interest, and helps to balance the movement of the figure leading off the canvas, as is the case in Dunes. My personal joy of painting is actually provided by these energetic brushstrokes: to fill the brush with this fluid pigment and drag it across the canvas, to have the ability to leave a mark where no one has left a mark before, provides the energy and concentration to carry each work through to completion.

Frequently I was asked to state which I was more concerned with: the action of painting or the subject matter. Almost without question, I stated my preference for the physical action of painting, the subject matter serving as a means to give my paintings some direction and continuity. This was very true in my earlier work, in which I derived the subject matter from black and white photos taken by some unknown photographer. Something about each photograph intrigued me enough to warrant a painting, but invariably, I was concerned first with paint application. These early works soon became very mechanical--not in draftsmanship, but in production. Since I had to make very few changes in composition from photo to canvas, I could produce several paintings in one week, simply because I was applying paint as quickly as possible

Fig. 3 Untitled for Two Reasons
28x30 11/75

with little regard for color relationships and the impact color had on form. The resulting works were interesting in their energetic style, but left me with a feeling of detachment; my efforts to reproduce a picture of an unknown model simply caused me to feel like the spectator in an unfamiliar situation.

Through desperation and much encouragement, I abandoned this long-accustomed technique of quick results, and began taking my own photos for subject matter. I soon discovered that this involved much decision-making, both when viewing through the eye-piece of the camera and when viewing the final printed image before painting. With my own photo compositions, I felt free to eliminate those items which were unnecessary or add those which were needed. I found that I could still exploit the medium, but that the action of the paint now had meaning: the subject became just as important as the application.

This "new freedom" began with the Talisman, a painting of my husband. Of course the subject matter in this painting is more important to me than my involvement with paint, but with the combination of meaningful subject matter and my excitement for the medium, never before had I exploited paint to this degree. Fresh new colors appeared in thick impasto strokes; strokes so thick that form was actually created by the texture of the paint. This is one of the few paintings in which I employed "short" paint, or, paint which keeps its original shape when applied because little or no painting medium is used.

Although I enjoy the effects achieved with these thick strokes of paint, I hesitate to use this technique consistently. Many art historians often question the degree of permanence of impasto work:

> The overloading of a painting with great gobs of impasto, to a degree that would never have been attempted by careful craftsmen of former periods, has been condemned by specialists in the technique of painting, ever since such practices have been in use. Ever since its adoption, the oil painting technique has followed rules developed over the centuries as artists have learned about the survival of painting, and such departures from accepted practices involve too many unknown factors to be considered safe. One of the great disadvantages of all of this sort of painting is the wellnigh impossible task of future cleaning and the necessity for its careful handling in general. Not all paintings are given museum care after they leave the artist's hands; not many of these textured effects can be expected to resist some of the mistreatment by handling and exposure which more soundly constructed works frequently survive.[2-3]

Because of atmospheric conditions also, an oil painting undergoes much expansion and contraction. If a composition contains a large area of thick paint, that film will not withstand the flexing of the canvas and eventually will crack. If thick strokes are used in combination with thinner areas, space is then allowed for expansion and contraction with no disappointing effects.

To thin paint and aid in the ease of application, I use a great deal of painting medium, mixed with the pigment, for each stroke. There are several formulas and many ingredients for medium, but the combination I prefer is equal parts stand oil, damar varnish and spirits of gum turpentine, with five or six drops of cobalt siccative dryer per ounce of oil. The stand oil is too oily to be used alone, but the damar gives it a thicker consistency and adds gloss and durability to the paint film. The purpose of the turpentine is merely manipulative since it acts as a thinner for the thick combination of varnish and oil. It will not, however, re-soften the medium after drying has occurred because the medium undergoes an irreversible chemical change (polymerization). Occasionally I add more turpentine to the liquid mixture because of loss due to evaporation, although many painters often add more turpentine to the original formula. I prefer to

Fig. 4 Talisman
25 x 29 4/76

use a thick medium, however, which gives more texture and richness to the paint.

I have found the cobalt dryer to be a very helpful addition to the painting medium. Dryers do not evaporate, but rather absorb oxygen from the air to produce a tough crust over the paint layer, while continuing to transmit oxygen to the layers beneath. If a painting must be handled often during its execution, the dryers help avoid the problem of smearing. In addition, this dry crust is a perfect layer upon which to apply another layer of paint. The layer beneath is dry enough so that it will not mix with the top layer, and it will also prevent the bottom layer from drawing oil from the new. This often happens when the same amount of oil is used in subsequent paint layers, causing a mat, or "dead", surface. The oil simply moves from the top layers to the bottom, eliminating any glossy or protective film in those areas. The dryer can help isolate these layers somewhat to avoid the problem of "sinking in", but if no dryer is used, care must be taken to increase the amount of oil in the medium for each successive layer.

Slow-drying pigments such as blue, gold and brown tones are more susceptible to becoming "sunken" or mat. Because of the longer drying time required, the oils are given more opportunity to move to the bottom of the fresh layer as it dries, or to other layers beneath. The recently completed Mr. T. E. Weed and Friends is a painting which exists almost entirely of these "earth tones." Through much experimentation and many discarded canvases, I learned to work with these colors, allowing them to retain the gloss which they possessed as fresh, new paint. Here again, I used warm and cool under-painting tones to contrast with the final tones of the composition and to introduce flecks or shapes of unusual color to

the total color scheme. The pigment for these underpainted areas was mixed only with turpentine to thin the paint and aid in the ease of its application. Thick paint, mixed with the medium, was then applied in colors corresponding to the final tones, building up the brush strokes and textures apparent in this composition. Each subsequent layer was then made thinner and more fluid by the addition of increasing amounts of medium.

I often get involved in certain areas of a painting, rather than working on the entire canvas in one session. Some areas are taken almost to completion, while others remain covered for some time with only the underpainting. To complete these small sections quickly, which obviously contain much wet paint, I simply add more medium to the freshly mixed pigment on my palette, and as a result, it slides easily across the wet surface below, leaving it undisturbed.

Since Mr. Weed and Friends is a take off on the theme of "our family portrait," I was very critical of the draftsmanship and tones involved with each figure. I decided that my face was much too dark in this painting, and employed the technique of scumbling to lighten the surface. A small amount of titanium Everwhite was strongly diluted with the medium to give it a semi-transparent quality. Retouch varnish was first applied to the dry area to isolate, and also bond, the paint layers. The scumbling glaze was then applied to the entire facial area with a brush, the excess was rubbed off with a rag, and touches of color were reapplied to the necessary areas. This technique helped to achieve the desired effect, and convinced me that it possesses many possibilities, some of which I plan to attempt in the future.

If "dead" areas are a problem, a good solution is the use of a very thin layer of retouch varnish sprayed upon these sections.

Fig. 5 Mr. T. E. Weed and Friends
31 x 27½ 3/77

This varnish helps to bring out the full, wet appearance of the dry paint before applying new. Also, I found that it helps in blending a new thin layer of paint into the one beneath, promoting better adhesion. Retouch varnish should be used only in those areas which are to receive another layer of paint--it should not be used as a final picture varnish.

Because I feel it important to let paintings dry for one year or more, I have not had the opportunity to experiment with the final varnishes. However, my formula for thick painting medium seems to retain its gloss for many months, causing my compositions to appear as though they are still wet. I am very much in favor, though, of using a final picture varnish because of the uniform appearance and protection it provides. In the Contemporary Oil Painter's Handbook concerning final varnishes, the artist is cautioned against using natural resin varnishes, such as damar, because of their tendency to yellow with age.[2-4] Instead, the synthetic varnishes are recommended, of which I would prefer a liquid form over an aerosol. An aerosol can does not often expel its contents in a consistent manner, leaving spots and runs upon the surface. The liquid form, which is brushed on, gives the artist complete control over the substance which, I feel, is an important advantage.

In the first of my compositions dealing with plant life, Green Series #1 is a painting in which the pigment combined with thick painting medium is readily apparent. Many of the strokes appear slick, as if still wet, adding to the liveliness of the foliage. These strokes, when observed at very close-range make absolutely no sense as far as form and space are concerned, and the viewer will also notice at a short distance, that much of the primed canvas

is exposed. Although these observations might be considered defects when applied to some subjects, they combine here to enhance the airy feeling of this composition.

Rather than to paint an area white, I often prefer to leave sections of the canvas untouched. The white of the canvas is pure and smooth, acting as a nice light background tone. It is difficult to paint larger areas with pure white unless care is taken to use an immaculately clean brush, clear medium and fresh turpentine. I simply prefer to leave smooth portions of the white canvas exposed, since they provide a nice contrast to the texture of the painted areas.

Much of the canvas is also visible in Green Series #2, a much larger composition than the first. To obtain lights here, I combined the white of the canvas with the use of off-whites mixed on my palette. The glossy daubs and streaks of paint combined with thick medium are to give the sensation of heavy dew upon the foliage.

The small body of water in the lower right-hand corner of this painting was executed in a very different manner from the major portion of the composition. The desired color and medium were mixed as usual, then a great amount of turpentine was added. A wide brush was dipped into the mixture and applied to the canvas approximately three inches above the pond area. The paint ran from the brush and down the canvas, leaving stains and dribbles, characteristic of the appearance of water. The surrounding areas were then daubed in, and more of the turpentine mixture was allowed to run on the surface under these new, thicker areas, to provide their reflection upon the water. While a lot of turpentine is required

Fig. 6 Green Series #1
22 x 30 4/76

Fig. 7 Green Series #2
48 x 45 5/76

for this technique, it is essential that care be taken to not add too much, resulting in an extended medium which is unable to bond the pigment to the canvas.

I enjoyed the contrast of the stained canvas combined with heavily painted areas, and employed the technique again in Diptych in Green. This was the largest composition I had attempted, and I was forced to limit its size only for the practical reason of handling the structure. Because I had planned its construction in two hinged parts, however, I was thus able to make it twice as large as the practical size for my handling.

In this painting, as with all the other foliage pieces in oil, I first drew the shapes upon the primed canvas with a charcoal pencil. This was then rubbed or flicked off with a rag so as not to mix with the paint, and painting with the local (naturalistic) colors began. I used no form of imprimatura as I had with the portraits, but rather, I mixed the pigment with a small amount of medium and applied it to the drawn image.

Often the first strokes of paint applied were the ones which appeared as the finished portions upon the surface. Some of these areas were overpainted, but the highly textured surfaces remained as they were when first applied. The paint strokes are more controlled overall in this foliage composition than in the others, because of the size I had to deal with. Many of the large flat areas of the leaves could not be handled in my typical nervous style--the result would have been a confusion of form and light. I did manage, though, to treat a few areas in the manner I so enjoy: the tree bark and withered brown leaves received great smears of

Fig. 8 Diptych in Green
52 x 88 1-4/77

paint and medium, giving them their characteristic texture.

I often isolated areas of this painting, treating them as small, separate compositions. Each section was painted alla prima, or directly upon the white ground with no underpainting. This technique is also called premier coup painting because it is done in one session. Obviously I was unable to complete this painting and Green Series #2 in one sitting, but the isolated sections were treated in that manner. This technique also avoids the problem of flat, sunken colors because all of the oil is contained in one layer. If areas are repainted with several layers over many sessions, the oil will most certainly be sucked from the top layers to the bottom during the drying process. Upon nearing completion of Diptych , however, I found many of the alla prima areas required touch-ups to coordinate the painting as a whole. Again mat areas were avoided because of the addition of dryers to the painting medium. I returned to the painting at each session to find that a crust had been formed over the paint layer, causing it to feel dry to the touch. To resume work, I simply sprayed the areas with retouch varnish which allowed for the easy application of a new paint layer while bonding it to the old.

To avoid the use of too much white mixed with the pigment, I often left tiny lines of white canvas exposed around the edges of the leaves. These lines proved nice highlighting effects while making a strong division between leaf and background.

Brushes used for this, and all of my oil compositions, range from one and one-half inches, being the largest, to one-fourth inch for detail work. Generally, I use only four brushes, but for this painting, I experimented with a leather polishing brush which is very similar

Fig. 8A Diptych in Green
44 x 52 3-4/77

in appearance to a round shaving brush. However, the bristles on my brush were shorter and stiff, possessing very little flexibility. When placed perpendicular to the surface of the canvas and used in a circular motion, it blended the paint wonderfully, while adding an unusual texture to the surface. This brush was used particularly on the far right area of this painting for the cacti. These fuzzy succulents would pose a problem if attention were given to every thorn upon their surface. Instead, I applied their basic color with the turpentine stain method, defined important areas with thicker paint and a brush, then blended all with the stiff leather brush. This gave the illusion of the prickly surface without the obvious and meticulous application of monotonous rows of thorns. The aura of white thorns surrounding a section of these plants was painted in much the same manner. The light paint was daubed and streaked on with a brush then feathered and blended with the leather one.

Throughout the process of painting the cacti, and upon their completion, I lightly applied a cloth to "lift" paint from the wet surface to increase the effect of their thorny texture. The only additions then required were a few highlights applied in these areas with the detailing brush.

With each new foliage composition, my interest and enthusiasm for these forms increased: the unrestraint of the painting techniques and color application provided by these foliage shapes became more intriguing with every painting session. I feel my energetic application of paint is brought to its best advantage in dealing with plant life; the short strokes and quick smears of paint allow for my physical enjoyment of the medium and provide the plants with the freedom to appear as in motion and constant change, an important

quality of plant life.

I plan to continue with these studies and perhaps experiment with different textures by the introduction of new materials to the canvas. Plans have also been made for a foliage "quadruplex" of four canvases hinged to fold into a small unit for self-protection and easy handling. The possibilities seem endless for these compositions for the simple reason that the execution and completion of one leads immediately to plans for the next.

CHAPTER III

THEORIES AND TECHNIQUES OF WATERCOLOR

This is a tactile thing--to paint with paint and feel that paint. What did you paint it on (on paper)--Well then why in the Hell didn't you give the paper a chance to show itself?--ditto with canvas--

--John Marin

The most important secret of watercolor is to realize that the paper is not only a support upon which to apply paint, but that it is an integral part of the painting. The transparency and freshness of this medium is a result of the light reflected through the paint from the paper. Although washes can be made lighter by mopping them when wet or scrubbing the dry area with sandpaper, the purest white in watercolor can only be achieved by leaving that section of the paper untouched.

Lights or transparencies can be obtained by thinning the pigment with water to the very lightest wash, which will not hinder its adhesion to the paper in the slightest. When dry, numerous light washes may be placed over the first, resulting in a luminous transparency and a third hue which could not be achieved by the mixture of the two on the palette. The addition of white to the pigment rarely has a positive effect: the pigment now becomes opaque, dull, and of a different hue.[3-1]

Richer darks are also achieved by this English method of layer upon layer. In my first foliage watercolor, Orchids , I mixed the darks first on my palette then applied them to the paper.

I was so intent on forming a strong silhouette of the flowers against the background that the consideration of subtle color relationships escaped me! Better results could have been achieved had I gradually built-up these areas with transparent washes.

The salvaging factor of this painting is the strong contrast produced by the flowers and the background. The orchids seem to advance in space, a result of their strong outline and pure, vivid color. Spots or areas of pure color, especially warm color, readily advance toward the viewer because of their striking quality. The spots of yellow upon the plant stem in Green Series #3 also have this effect. These spots, in combination with the disc shapes of the stem, help to make the stem move gracefully outward, then back into space.

The darks are not as murky in this composition as in the first, but they still lack the richness they deserve. Except for the area around the stem, this painting is rather monochromatic, possibly too cautious in its color relationships. Nevertheless, a strong feeling of action is evident in this painting through the graceful movement of the plant stem, its large leaves, and the lively touches of rust, freely applied.

Gum arabic thinned with water is the medium necessary for water-color manipulation and adhesion. Because the gum, which is combined with the pigment during its manipulation, undergoes no chemical change upon drying, it permits the cakes or tubes of paint to be resoftened after they have set. Although it is completely soluble in water in tube or cake form, the medium forms a paint layer upon the paper which is sufficiently resistant to remain undisturbed by subsequent

Fig. 9 Orchids
16 x 25 10/76

Fig. 10 Green Series #3
18 x 24 11/76
Collection of Ms. Esker Luebke
Knoxville, Tennessee

brush strokes.[3-2]

The paint is taken from the brush by irregularities of the paper and by absorption. Watercolor requires a full degree of absorbency for proper effects, but the surface does not have to be exceedingly coarse. In very smooth grounds, the absorbency of the surface counteracts for the coarseness, picking-up the paint as desired. The coarseness of very rough paper is simply for the purpose of obtaining the sparkling, granular appearance and has nothing to do with adhesion. These coarse papers are heavy and flat enough not to require stretching, but lighter weight paper must first be soaked in water then attached in some manner to a sturdy support.

When stretching paper, I carefully place the soaked paper upon a piece of plaster board and apply dampened paper tape along each edge of the paper. Paint may be introduced at this stage to achieve soft, hazy effects, but I prefer to wait until the paper has dried and is taut, before I begin.[3-3] When light-weight paper is used, unstretched, irregular ripples and pools of color are formed which are very difficult to control.

Planned and controlled pools of pigment can, on the other hand, be a very important aspect of watercolor technique. When painting Magnificare , I often formed a desired shape with the use of water alone. Then instead of mixing them on my palette, I would add a touch of the desired colors to the liquid shape. The result was a soft, fuzzy shape in precisely the position desired on the paper. This is a helpful technique when unsure of the placement of a few shapes and colors: with the application of clear water, no stain is introduced to the paper so that a change can be made. The water is simply mopped-up and the area left to dry completely while

Fig. 11 Magnificare
20 x 28 3/77

working on another section of the paper. When dry, the shape can then be corrected or repositioned, and the color applied.

This technique was used particularly in the background portion of Magnificare to carefully silhouette the shape of the thorns on the left tree. When the first layer of paint was dry, the second color was floated into position in the same manner. Although many layers of paint are involved in this portion of the composition, only the first two were handled this way. Too much water on top of these delicate washes can cause the area to appear bleached, with little substantial color importance.

To also gain better control of shape placement, an area which is not to receive its first, or subsequent, layer of paint can be masked with an application of rubber cement. In the upper portion of the composition, I masked the white paper so that paint could be freely applied to the area without interfering with the white. When the entire section was dry, I simply rubbed the cement off with my finger, leaving the desired effect. The cement was also used on areas which had been previously painted so that new paint could be applied around them without changing their original color.

Colors remained fairly intense and pure in the enlarged portion of this painting, to contrast with the composition outside this area and the background within the square also consists of layer upon layer of pure color. Spots of yellow, yellow-green and red were used to make edges or forms advance, in fact, to contribute to the illusion that the entire section is magnified and advancing in space.

Because of the texture of the paper, paint was applied in a very different manner in Double Feature. The grain of this coarse paper

varies the way paint is taken from the brush, resulting in a greater depth and surface sparkle. Caution must be taken with this heavy paper to avoid filling the grain with paint; the inherent properties of the paper would be destroyed and the painting would appear dull and flat.

The predominate method of painting I employed for this composition was the mosaic manner of the Impressionist watercolors. Thin spaces were left between color shapes for sharpness, then when dry, a light wash was applied over the spaces to join them. I did not use the method of floating color into clear water, but shape placement was determined by light pencil lines in each portion.

Quite often I will lightly sketch in a composition with pencil, and after the paint is dry, apply jittery (or, as one instructor called them: "giggly") outlines of varying pressure for definition and interest. These lines are quite apparent in all my watercolor compositions, but Double Feature is an exception. Because of the properties of the paper and the way it accepts paint, very little pencil was needed to define shapes. I was able to apply paint, which the paper quickly absorbed and dried, and return to the area with subsequent brush strokes in mind. With light weight papers, I would wait some time for the absorption and drying process to occur, and as a consequence, lose my train of thought for a particular area.

The lower portion of the painting consists of many "dry brush" areas in which paint is lightly applied over the surface, and the use of very little water enables the paint to remain on the high nubs of the paper with the untouched white areas sparkling from below.

The paint in the upper portion was applied with the use of more water, with some sections dampened lightly with a sponge before

Fig. 12 Double Feature
15 x 22½ 4/77

paint application. The contrast provided by the two sections promotes the feeling of depth and change: the bottom section appears to be growing into the upper, which becomes ethereal at its top edge.

Double Feature is definitely the more abstract of all my watercolor compositions. If it were not for the characteristic color of the foliage, the shapes might appear as merely abstract shapes with no indication of plant life. I feel my watercolors may become increasingly abstract in time as I discover more about the medium. Watercolor is a relatively new method of painting for me, and I feel I have much experimentation to do. I enjoy the concept of compositions growing into each other with the uppermost section vanishing into vaporous forms, and plan to use this idea many times. It is one of my goals to combine the many techniques and effects which have proven most successful into a single composition. Only until I have used all these methods and have learned to use them well together, will I feel that I truly know how to exploit watercolor as a painting medium.

CONCLUSION

Anyone who paints is a damn fool—unless he be born a damn fool. Then he has a right to paint.

—John Marin

Because my interest in art was detected at a very early age, I feel certain that it was from an inborn source. My parents, who are artistic in their own right, encouraged my artistic development through much praise and private instruction and by furnishing an endless supply of materials, including my own "studio". Since I received only approval at this early age upon completion of a piece, I soon became very praise-oriented: my concern at that time was to please the viewer.

Social acceptance was a very strong factor in the planning and execution of my work. I have spent most of my life in a small town north of Charleston, and have received constant feedback about my work from the citizens of our small community. I strongly believe this is the reason the subject matter in my work is realistic rather than abstract: my feeble attempts at total abstraction were always met with confusion and disappointment by local "connoisseurs", which prompted my quick return to identifiable objects.

To continue producing works for myself, while at the same time remaining true to social convention, I began applying paint to the canvas in abstract shapes upon the surface of an object within a realistic composition. I enjoyed this approach so completely that

I soon developed the strong interest in my physical involvement with the paint. The completed forms were abstract to some degree because of the free application of paint upon their surface, but at the same time, the public, myself included, could identify with the subject matter and the mood evoked by the total composition.

Although artists are non-conformists to a great degree, many of us strive to gain approval and recognition through our work. Habits or personalities may not win approval by society as a whole, but if our work is accepted, we have gained the greatest achievement: our work becomes our repute.

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